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A Corpus-Based Study of the Grammatical Errors Among Descriptive Essays of Thai EFL Secondary Students

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ABSTRACT

This corpus-based study was conducted to analyze and classify the most common grammatical errors among descriptive essays of Thai EFL secondary learners. To determine the common grammatical errors, a corpus of thirty (30) descriptive essays was collected as the instrument. The grammatical errors committed by the students were identified, analyzed, categorized, and classified into five (5) types. Hence, the results showed that the most common grammatical errors were punctuations, prepositions, subject-verb agreement, articles, and spellings. Based on these results, it was found that first language (L1) interference influences the writing skills of the learners. This corpus-based ELT study suggests EFL teachers develop new teaching strategies and styles, incorporating authentic and personalized teaching-learning materials for essay writing. In addition, the results imply the creation of innovative pedagogical methods in the ELT classroom that are suitable and can match the students' strengths and weaknesses in writing.

Keywords: Corpus-base, Error Analysis, EFL learners, Descriptive essay, Grammatical *errors*

1.INTRODUCTION

Writing is undeniably one of the most important skills and parts of communication. A good writing skill fosters the ability to expound and express ideas with clarity, precision, and accuracy. In addition, English writing is a very important skill that is widely used as a device to facilitate and present students' educational knowledge and occupational opportunities (Chen, 2007). Consequently, proficient skills in writing can pave the way for the students to many other crucial facilities of learning that will help them succeed in their academics and future careers. Globalization increases competition in all aspects of academia and employment. This is why schools across the world deliberately teach writing in order to prepare students to be more effective, adept, and well-versed in the said skill. Thus, an excellent facility in English writing will help them keep pace with the global standards.

Writing is one of the most difficult skills that language learners are expected to acquire, requiring the mastery of a variety of linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural competencies. (Barkaoui, 2007, P.1). It is considered difficult because it requires not only mastery but also a higher level of proficiency than any other academic skill. According to Celce-Murcia &Olshtain (2000), writing also requires critical planning and revising skills, a process that often worries the writers. Moreover, writing a good piece of essay, especially in English or other second languages, requires several factors. In addition to all aspects of language proficiency including vocabulary, grammar, and correct expressions, the writer needs to possess appropriate thinking and reasoning skills, as well as logical and interesting thoughts. (Padgate, 2008)

1.1: THE PROBLEM AND ITS BACKGROUND

Grammatical errors are frequently found among the written works, specifically descriptive essays of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners here in Thailand. Most Thai EFL students find English writing extremely difficult because there is a significant need to utilize accurate English grammar and possess wide vocabulary knowledge to produce well-written outputs. Furthermore, writing correctly and effectively is quite challenging for non-native (English) learners, especially Thai EFL students. Ibrahim (2006, p.2) pointed out that writing is a difficult skill for native and non-native speakers alike, for writers should make a balance between multiple issues such as content, organization, purpose, audience, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling, and mechanics. In order to utilize English properly, the students are required to master and be knowledgeable linguistically. It is said that to be competent in English, individuals need to acquire linguistic knowledge including grammar or syntax, morphology, phonology, and semantics.

1.2: RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The present study aimed to analyze grammatical errors among descriptive English essays of Thai EFL secondary school students. In order to achieve this aim, the following research questions were formulated:

(1) What are the common grammatical errors found in descriptive essays of Thai students?

(2) How are the common grammatical errors found in the descriptive essays of Thai students classified?

2. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This corpus-based study was conducted for some reasons; To scrutinize the most common grammatical errors committed by Thai EFL secondary students in their descriptive essays. To analyze how these common grammatical errors were classified in descriptive English essays done by the secondary Thai EFL students. The study aimed to find the most common grammatical errors and their classification to address the writing challenges of the Thai EFL students that could lead to their improvement and proficiency. Thus, the study also could be used as a device for the creation of suitable teaching and instructional materials that will reduce the writing problems of Thai EFL students in the future.

3.REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This chapter mainly presents the literature review and related research studies on error analysis regarding grammatical errors in the production of written outputs of EFL students that are relevant and necessary for this research.

3.1: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this study, Error Analysis (EA) is described and explained relating to the grammatical errors committed by the Thai EFL students.

3.1.1: Errors

The study of errors in writing becomes very important when it comes to the learning of languages since it is a study of the language process (Ellis, 2002; Katip&Gampper, 2016; Khumphee&Yodkamlue, 2017; Phettongkam, 2017). An error is defined as an action that is incorrect or not in compliance with the rules. The terms error and mistake have different meanings. Brown (2000: 76) said error is visible deviations from the grammar of adults or non-native speakers that reflect the competence of their learner's language, whilemistakesrefertoperformancefactorssuchasmemory, spelling fatigue, and emotional tension. Another explanation was, that an error is an integral and inevitable feature of second language acquisition (Alanazi, 2017). Corder (1967) stated that errors are seen as failures of competence and mistakes are seen as failures of performance. In accordance with the definitions of error provided, error analysis was then very important for foreign language learning to clearly understand the process of the language (Jobeen, Kazemian, & Shahbaz, 2015).

3.1.2: Error Analysis

Error Analysis became a scientific method in its own right in the '70s, owing a lot to the work of Corder (1967), Richards (1971), and Selinker (1972), who pointed out different aspects of the second/foreign language learners' language system, which is neither the L1 (mother tongue) nor the L2 (second/foreign language). According to Ekmekci (1984:262; cited in Hahn, 1987), error analysis is the study to examine the actual errors of the learners which are produced in the process of learning the target language. Similarly, Brown (2000) also defines error analysis as the study of learner errors, which are produced during the process of language learning, to reveal how the target language system operates within the learner. Ellis (1997) divides the process of EA into 4 steps: 1) identification, 2) description, 3) explanation, and 4) evaluation. The first step of error analysis is to identify and recognize errors by comparing the language structures the learners produce with the correct structures of the target language. If the structures are incorrect, they are marked as errors. The second step is to describe and classify all errors into types such as grammatical errors, phonological errors, lexical errors, and morphological errors and to count the frequency of occurrence for each type of error. The third step of EA is to explain why errors occur, or to describe the sources of errors. This step is considered to be a difficult task in EA since there are varying sources of errors. Finally, the last step of EA is to define errors. Some errors can be considered more serious than others because they are likely to hinder comprehensibility in communication.

3.2: Related Studies on Analysis of Grammatical Errors by ESL/EFL learners

The results in this study are similar to those found in the studies on the analysis of grammatical errors both in Thai EFL students' writing conducted by Srichai (2002), Na-ngam (2005), and Iamsiu (2014); and in other EFL students' writing conducted by Maros (2007), and Lasaten (2014). According to the study bySrichai (2002), "Types and frequency of global and local errors in 59 written works", the most frequent syntactic errors were errors in misuse and omission of prepositions, errors in incomplete sentences, and word order/ word positions. Meanwhile, Na-ngam's (2005) study,

"Grammatical errors in English written assignments", found that grammatical errors frequently found were incomplete sentences, errors in nouns, errors in spelling, errors in tenses, errors in agreement, and errors in articles. On the other hand, Iamsiu's (2014) study, "Types of errors in students' written works and the influence of mother tongue interference to students' writing", found that the most frequent types of errors were word choices, sentence structures, subject-verb agreement, word orders, and the use of connecting words. In EFL contexts-related studies, Maros' (2007) study, "Types of errors in students' essay writing and the effects of L1 interference to the students' writing", found that the most three frequent errors found were the use of articles, subject-verb agreement, and copula 'be'. In addition, Lasaten's (2014) study, "Types of common linguistic errors in English composition and short essays produced by teacher education students" found that the most common errors that occurred were verb tenses, sentence structures, punctuations, and word choices, spellings, prepositions, and articles. Consequently, the current study and the previous studies had similar findings because all of these studies' respondents were Thai EFL learners or EFL learners alike. Therefore, most of these studies' participants might have the same level of English language skills and knowledge, and also similar challenges in creating a piece of English written work such as a descriptive essay.

4.RESEARCH METHOD

The researchers used the quantitative method and also the procedures of errors analysis itself to show the students' errors when writing the English essay. On the other hand, the researchers calculated the errors and performed the necessary corrections or reconstructions.

4.1: The Participants

The participants of the study were high school students in a public secondary school in Pattaya, Chonburi province in the Kingdom of Thailand. These thirty (30) students were chosen as the research participants because of some reasons such as; (a) Writing is part of the important skill in their respective courses that they needed to improve. (b) They are students in the STEM program enrolled this semester. In other words, they were bilingual students in the Kingdom. Some of them have studied in the Bilingual Program since kindergarten and are taught by the local teachers and foreign teachers including the Filipinos as well.

4.2: The source of Corpus

The source of corpus chosen in the study was thirty (30) descriptive essays of Thai EFL secondary students. Descriptive essays were a readily available source of corpus for this study and due to the limited time, this small-scale corpus provided sufficient information that answered the research questions of this study.

4.3: Data Collection and Instrument

The data were obtained from students' descriptive essays of 150-200 words on the topic *"Decriminalization of Marijuana in Thailand"*. The Thai students performed the task as a classroom assignment to gain the most reliable and authentic results from the different sources available online. It also served as a practice for their research skills in finding and sorting out the information needed for the topic. The researchers collected the (30) descriptive essays from the secondary students as a sampling instrument to find out the most common grammatical errors among Thai EFL learners' written outputs.

4.4: Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the following formula:

P= F X 100 %   *Notes: P: percentage   F: frequency   N: number of samples*

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section of the study presents the results of the data gathering done by the researchers including its corresponding discussion, analysis, and interpretation, and they are presented based on the logical order of the stated problems of this study. The summary results of this study have shown below that the Thai EFL secondary students made different types of general errors in their descriptive essays. This study was conducted to find out the most common grammatical errors among descriptive essays of Thai EFL students and how are these grammatical errors classified. Furthermore, the grammatical errors were noted, counted, and categorized as below;

Table 1 Table 1-The detailed illustration of the Grammatical Errors

No. of Respondent Students (RS)	Subject-Verb Agreement (SV)	Spellings (SP)	Punctuations (PUNC)	Prepositions (PRE)	Articles (ART)	Total Number of Errors (TNE)	Total Percentage of Errors (TPE)
RS-1	7	6	3	5	5	26	5.26%
RS-4	9	7	2	5	3	26	5.26%
RS-2	7	7	2	3	2	21	4.25%
RS-3	5	7	4	2	2	20	4.05%
RS-10	7	4	2	4	2	19	3.85%
RS-6	3	3	5	4	3	18	3.64%
RS-7	5	3	6	2	2	18	3.64%
RS-9	7	5	2	2	2	18	3.64%
RS-18	4	3	5	3	3	18	3.64%
RS-8	3	5	4	2	3	17	3.44%
RS-12	8	3	3	2	1	17	3.44%
RS-14	5	2	2	6	2	17	3.44%
RS-24	6	3	3	2	3	17	3.44%
RS-5	3	3	2	6	2	16	3.24%
RS-11	6	4	3	2	1	16	3.24%
RS-28	4	3	4	3	2	16	3.24%
RS-30	6	3	2	3	2	16	3.24%
RS-13	3	2	3	5	2	15	3.04%
RS-22	3	3	2	3	4	15	3.04%
RS-25	3	4	3	2	3	15	3.04%
RS-26	2	4	4	3	2	15	3.04%
RS-29	3	4	3	3	2	15	3.04%
RS-19	3	2	3	3	3	14	2.83%
RS-27	2	3	4	3	2	14	2.83%
RS-15	5	2	2	2	2	13	2.63%
RS-16	4	3	3	2	1	13	2.63%
RS-17	3	3	4	2	1	13	2.63%
RS-23	3	3	2	2	3	13	2.63%
RS-20	3	2	3	1	3	12	2.43%
RS-21	2	2	2	1	4	11	2.23%
Total	134	108	92	88	72	494	100%

5.1: Table 1-The detailed illustration of the Grammatical Errors

Table 1 showsthe details of the total grammatical errors committed by each respondent with the corresponding shared percentage as a whole. The researchers have identified and highlighted the top five (5) respondents who got the most and the highest total errors and the bottom five (5) respondents who got the least total errors committed from their descriptive essay writing. In other words, error always comes to the students' minds, especially in writing an English essay. Corder (1981:51) states that error is both an ancient activity and at the same time a comparatively new one, whereas Jeremy harmer (2001:34) also defines error as part of the learner interlingua that is the version of the language which a learner has at any one stage of development and which is continually reshaped as he/she aims toward full mastery. Wu and Garza (2014) indicated that Taiwanese students had the greatest English writing problems in subject-verb agreement, sentence fragment, singular/plural, missing verbs, word choice, and use of articles. Pongsukvajchakul (2019) study found that EFL learners including Thai students tend to commit similar errors in subject-verb agreement, nouns, verbs, and articles due to the L1 interference. The Thai language does not have grammatical rules for singular or plural nouns and verbs, and the use of articles before nouns.

Table 2-The Classification of Grammatical Errors

Types of Grammatical Errors (TGE)	Total Number of Errors (TNE)	Total Percentage of Errors (TPE)	Mean/n=30
Subject-Verb Agreement (SV)	134	27.13%	4.47
Spellings (SP)	108	21.86%	3.60
Punctuations (PUNC)	92	18.62%	3.07
Prepositions (PRE)	88	17.81%	2.93
Articles (ART)	72	14.57%	2.40
Total	494	100%	

5.2: Table 2-The Classification of Grammatical Errors

The summary of the data below shows that the Thai EFL secondary students made the most and the highest grammatical error in the subject-verb agreement (SV) category with a mean value of **4.47,** followed by the spelling (SP) with a mean value of **3.60** and it is close to the punctuation (PUNC) category with the mean value of **3.07**, then preposition (PRE) and the articles as well with the least mean value. It is clear that errors naturally happen because of the different rules of certain languages. Moreover, the past decade has sought to identify various aspects of EFL/ESL writing problems. Particularly in the Thai context, much of the research in this field has indicated that grammatical error is the major problem in Thai students' writing (Pongpairaj, 2002; Tawilapakul, 2002; Na-ngam, 2005).
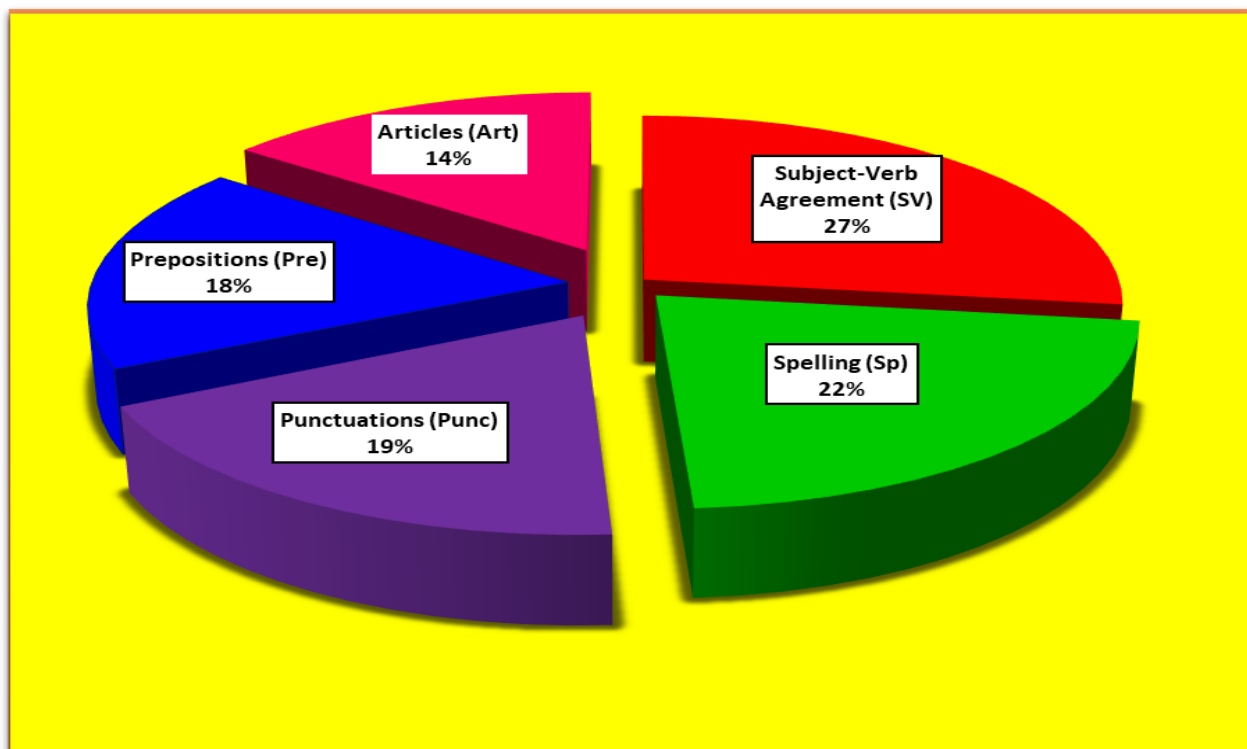

Figure 1

5.3: Figure 1-The Total Percentages of Grammatical Errors

The most evident distinction of the grammatical error category was found and made clear in the graph presented in figure 1, whereas the subject-verb agreement (SV) shared 27% which is the biggest part of the total percentage errors as stated below. In like manner, the basic structure and usage of English grammar focusing on the most problematic aspects that students frequently make should be introduced to the class. Harmer (1998), also suggested that it is essential to present grammar rules or structures to the class since they can help students see how the particular structures are formed in a sentence. Thus, if teachers realize that their students are still struggling in producing accurate English writing, the extra intensive lesson in English grammar should be taken place with the use of customized teaching materials to address the urgent need of the students.

Table 3-Grammatical Errors committed

No	Types of Grammatical Errors (TGE)	Committed Errors (CE)	Total Frequency Errors (TFE)	Total Percentage Errors (TPE)	Mean/ n=30
1	Subject-Verb Agreement (SV) (The use of "*plural*" instead of "*singular*" forms or "*singular*" instead of "*plural*")	You can see that marijuana **have (has)** both advantages and disadvantages.	134	27.13%	4.47
2	Spelling (SP) (The use of "*e*" instead of "*o*" or *dislocation* of letters)	It is also advisable to seek advice from your **docter (doctor)** before using it.	108	21.86%	3.60
3	Punctuations (PUNC) (The use of "*full stop*", "*comma*" and "*apostrophe*")	Marijuana is now legal in Thailand **(.)** Some people say it's good and others say it's bad.	92	18.62%	3.07
4	Prepositions (PRE) ("*in*", "*on*" and "*at*")	The Thai government has issued policy restriction **at (on)** the use of marijuana.	88	17.81%	2.93
5	Articles (ART) (Omission of articles "*the*" "*a*" & "*an*")	**(The)** Best way is to use it properly and not abuse it.	72	14.57%	2.40
	Total		494	100%	

5.4: Table 3-Grammatical Errors committed

The cross-examination of the found grammatical errors from the 5000 words was analyzed that consisting of 150-200 words for each essay according to its type and category from the highest to the lowest mean value recorded;

5.4.1: Subject-verb agreement (*SV*)

(*Using "plural" instead of "singular" forms or "singular" instead of "plural" and vice versa*). **Here's the sample below;**

❖ You can see that marijuana have *(has)* both advantages and disadvantages.

The errors in subject-verb (SV) agreement showed that the students were still confused to determine the relationship between the subject and the verb itself. Moreover, they were incapable of differentiating certain verbs in several tenses. This one was a part of the students' errors that the students had less understanding of that kind of material.

5.4.2: Spellings (*SP*)

(The switching of the vowel "*0*" and "*e*" and the *doubling* or *dislocation* of letters)

❖ It is also recommended to seek a piece of advice from your docter (*doctor*) before using it.

Correct Spelling is very important in writing. Most of the time, once you misspelled the word it may change the meaning that the author intended to convey in the text (Fagerberg, 2006). Spelling, in particular, is one of the many English writing problems the EFL students encountered everywhere. The Thai students were not excused about this, considering all the writing errors made by them were found to be one of the most frequent errors (Sattayatham, and Ratanapinyowong, 2008; Na-ngam, 2005; Khaourai, 2002; Tannart, 2000). As Nangam (2005) spelling errors are not found only at primary levels but also among university Thai students and some Thai professionals as well. The first Primary reason why Thai students produce spelling errors is the inference of their writing system defined by Coulmas (1999, p. 560) as a set of visible or tactile signs used to represent units of language systematically'. That is a sound-based written system. The sound-based writing links letters as written symbols or graphemes to sounds or phonemes (Cook, 2004). For example, <ก> in Thai corresponds to the phoneme /k/or the grapheme <k> in English. The second primary reason is the lack of morphological knowledge when it comes to writing. here's the example; **"favorit"** and **"I *preffer* going to cinema."** In Thai, doubling of consonants is not common but students know words where this doubling happens and may use it where it is not required.

5.4.3: Punctuations (*PUNC*)

(The use of "*full stop*", "*comma*" and "*apostrophe*")

❖   Marijuana is now legal in Thailand (.) Some people say it's good and others say it's bad.

As far as punctuation is concerned, the Thai language has no punctuation marks and this leads to numerous mistakes in English made by EFL Thai students. More so, sentences in Thai are written with almost no spaces as space is equivalent to English commas or full stops (Smith, 2001).

5.4.4: Prepositions (PRE)

(The use of the basic preposition such as; "*in*", "*on*" and "*at*")

❖   The Thai government has issued policy restrictionsat (*on*) the use of marijuana.

Hemchua and Schmitt (2006) argued about the main reason for having preposition partner errors is lack of proficiency. For this reason, the Thai students are sometimes not aware of what particular preposition is needed and this would lead them to wrong use it. This situation is inevitable because even young native speakers take years to master prepositions (Durkin et al, 1985). Many researchers have also supported this view. Brudiprabha (1972) states that one-third of errors occurring in EFL/ESL students' written worksare caused by negative interference of L1. Moreover, Bhela (1999) points out that EFL errors result from word-by-word translation strategy or thinking in a mother tongue language.

5.4.5: Articles (ART)

(The Omission of articles such as; "*the*" "*a*" and "*an*")

❖   (*The*) Best way is to use it properly and not abuse it.

Omissions are faulty sentences characterized by "the absence of an item that must appear in a well-rounded utterance" (Dulay, Burt, and Krashen, 1982: 154) These are the common errors that can be found among Thai students because the use of articles does not exist in the Thai structure.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results above show that there are five types of errors committed by the participants of the study. It includes a faulty subject-verb agreement, incorrect spellings, missing full stops, comma splices, missing apostrophes, inappropriate prepositional usages, andomissions of articles. The study of the error analysis among the students' essays reveals that many students lack grammar and linguistic skills. Thus, it is clear that the students' insufficient linguistic knowledge and confusion of the rules contributed to their errors. Furthermore, this occurs as a result of their improficiency of the grammar rule and their reliance on inference from their first language. As Brown (2000) and Boey (1975) point out, "L1 interference is the most noticeable source of errors among second language learners because the students use their L1 experience to facilitate the second language learning process." In particular, EFL students translate their thoughts into English after initially thinking in their native language. In addition, Pongpairoj, (2002) claims that Thai students employ word order in Thai structures to write in English. This results from "insufficient understanding" of how Thai and English grammar differ and are similar. Lastly, Thep-Akrapong (2005) proposes that errors in the subject-verb agreement were very problematic to Thai students because the concept of subject-verb agreement is not found in Thai sentential concepts. For example, the precise limit of a Thai phrase is obscure. Moreover, the word order in Thai structure differs significantly from that of English.

As several studies have suggested, one of the key causes of Thai students' English writing difficulties is L1 interference. As a result, the distinctions between Thai and English languages should be highlighted for Thai students so that they do not have to face this difficulty again and again.

6.1: IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY TO ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING (ELT)

The pedagogical implications in English language teaching or ELT have been stated as follows;

6.1.1: Based on the result of this study, several grammatical errors have been identified and notified in terms of the English language structures. Therefore, EFL teachers should help and encourage the students to overcome their weaknesses.

6.1.2: The teaching of the structure and usage of English grammar should focus on the aspects where the students frequently commit mistakes when it comes to writing and even speaking as well. Harmer (1998), also suggested that it is very important to present grammar rules or structures to the learners clearly since they can help students see how the particular structures are formed in a sentence.

6.1.3: The findings and outputs that were gathered from this study could not be generalized to the entire population of Thai secondary students. In other words, it is strongly recommended to conduct a much more in-depth research study in order to come up with a much more relevant and prevalent understanding of the L2 language learning acquisition. The EFL teachers should point out and realize the differences between the features of the learners' mother tongue and their target language. This way can encourage the students to avoid employing Thai language structures in their writing. In particular, the specific features in English that do not exist in the Thai language should be focused on to make them aware of the differences and beyond.

6.1.4: It is highly recommended that future research replicates the study in a population of EFL learners from various backgrounds to acquire a different viewpoint on the issue of learners' grammatical errors. Furthermore, the researchers suggest conducting additional in-depth studies on error analysis in more specific areas of EFL grammar and writing to improve the quality of the English Language Teaching (ELT) teaching-learning process among EFL learners. Meanwhile, grammatical features and structures of each language are not similar and analogous, and errors made by the students are different and diverse. Hyland and Anan (2006) state that the awareness of syntactic differences between the two languages is essential for both teachers and students who need to produce a perfect piece of writing with accurate and precise grammatical forms and structures. Therefore, it is fair to say that the results of this study can be beneficial and relevant to the teaching of English writing in the Thai context. However, to make this area of

research study more relevant and intensive, further studies regarding correlations of L1 interference to L2 writing in varieties of genres and topics could be conducted.

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